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Where Are You, Ban Ki-Moon?

By JONATHAN TEPPERMAN

Of all the recent twists in the Syria saga, one of the most unexpected has been the sudden return to relevance of the United Nations, now holding its General Assembly in New York, and its otherwise invisible secretary general, Ban Ki-moon.

Since he came into office six-and-a-half years ago, Ban has remained remarkably anonymous, despite occupying one of the world's most high-profile jobs. This obscurity is especially striking in contrast to his predecessor, Kofi Annan, who was charismatic, dashing and often in the news, and earlier office-holders like Dag Hammarskjold, who helped define the job in the 1950s. And it's earned the South Korean diplomat withering criticism: He's been called among the worst secretaries general in U.N. history, a "powerless observer" and a "nowhere man"; Foreign Policy magazine even called for his resignation in 2010.

The U.N. under Ban's stewardship has managed to get some things right: (generally) providing effective relief to refugees, (generally) doing a decent job on peacekeeping, and avoiding the corruption and mismanagement scandals that tarnished the last years of Annan's tenure. But on Syria — the critical issue of the moment — Ban's record has been thin.

Although he has occasionally denounced the atrocities, and in mid-September even accused Bashar al-Assad of crimes against humanity (albeit only because he thought he wasn't being recorded), Ban and the United Nations have been totally ineffectual in stopping the carnage, as he himself recently acknowledged. He failed to speak out early and loudly against the atrocities and he waited a year into the fighting before appointing a special representative. (Never mind that that representative — Annan himself — ended up quitting in frustration and that his replacement has also accomplished little.)

What makes Ban's passivity especially damning is that it fits into a long pattern of underachievement. Although reputed to be modest, hard-working and personable in small groups, Ban is a clumsy communicator. Uncomfortable in English, he relies on notes when speaking and struggles to convey intellectual heft or moral drama. He's never managed to capture the public imagination; one former high-level U.N. official who spoke to me off the record said Ban "somehow just never comes through," adding: "You can write him a script and he'll read it, but even when he meets privately with senior heads of government, they come away disappointed by his lack of engagement."

Making virtue of necessity, Ban has tried to cast himself as a doer, not a talker, but he's largely failed on that front, too. Early in his tenure, he established climate change as his signature issue, but after the spectacular flameout of his 2009 global summit in Copenhagen he has made little headway. On internal reform, another pet project, he has pushed through some new codes of conduct for U.N. employees, but has acquiesced as U.N. watchdogs have been driven from office.

Ban has also been accused of sitting on his hands during the endgame of Sri Lanka's vicious civil war in 2009 when, according to Ken Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, "instead of alerting the world to the unfolding slaughter, the U.N., all the way up the chain of command, allowed the Sri Lankan government to bully it into silence." And Ban has obstinately refused to take responsibility for a cholera epidemic in Haiti that has killed some 8,000 locals and has been linked to the presence of U.N. peacekeepers. In February, he even invoked diplomatic immunity to avoid paying victims compensation.

Add it all up and you're left with a far from glorious record. But while Ban has been a letdown on many fronts, it's worth asking whether anyone else could have done better — at least on Syria. That question is important because the answer highlights deeper problems in the U.N. and how it's structured. The fact is that when the great powers squabble, there's little that anyone in the organization can accomplish, be they competent or not.

Consider: The secretary general's job, as it's set up, is one of the toughest on the planet. Designated by the U.N. Charter as the body's chief administrative officer, the secretary general gets the stature of a world leader but no army of his own to command (the blue helmets don't count, since, among other things, he cannot order them into battle). He is also, by design, a creature of the U.N.'s member states, especially the five permanent members of the Security Council, at whose pleasure he serves. Thus, explains Suzanne Nossel, a former deputy to Washington's U.N. ambassador for management and reform, "when you have a standoff between the major veto-wielding players" — like Russia versus the United States on whether to give teeth to the new deal on Syria's chemical weapons — "the role of the secretary general is highly constrained."

Even critics like Stephen Schlesinger, a former U.N. employee and author of a book on the institution, concede that while Ban should have made more progress on the many issues the great powers agree on or don't care about, when it comes to Syria "you could have put Dag or Kofi in the same situation and it's hard to imagine" they would have produced more results.

Hammarskjold and Annan might have spoken out more forcefully. But secretaries general who publicly cross their patrons don't last long — as Boutros Boutros-Ghali learned when he was denied a second term in 1996 after criticizing the Clinton administration for caring more about bloodshed in the Balkans than in Africa.

One last point to remember when counting Ban's faults: None of them should come as a surprise, for fecklessness is precisely what got him hired in the first place. The big powers, tired of locking horns with Annan, wanted someone bland and pliable to replace him, and the colorless South Korean fit the bill; Ban seemed, in the words of the author James Traub, "the cure for Annan's dangerous charisma."

Ban has certainly provided that cure. But the fault lies as much with those who chose him as with the man himself. That's something critics should keep in mind now and the next time the post comes open, in 2016. If the U.N.'s member states really want more effective leadership, they should hire someone actually able to provide it — and then get out of the way when he or she tries.